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SUBJECT: RECENT DEATHS IN NANDIGRAM HIGHLIGHT WEST BENGAL'S VIOLENT  
LOCAL POLITICS

REF: A) KOLKATA 0092 B) KOLKATA 0088 C) CALCUTTA 0017 D) CALCUTTA 0011

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The March 14 killings in the rural West Bengal district of Nandigram highlighted the truly violent nature of grassroots politics in the state (Reftels). Initially, the agitation was by local villagers opposed to the GOWB's plans to acquire their land for a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) but fundamentally, it was an issue within the state-ruling Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM) over local power and influence. The violence was triggered in January when CPM Member of Parliament (MP) and Haldia Development Authority (HDA) Chairman Laxman Seth sent notices to villagers in the Nandigram area that their land was to be acquired for a new SEZ to be developed by the Indonesian corporation, the Salim Group. Seth is recognized as the local "Godfather," who as HDA Chairman has enriched himself through control of shipping, transport and real estate in the area. The new SEZ offered an opportunity to expand his personal fiefdom. Nandigram had historically been a Leftist and CPM stronghold but fell outside the rapid development occurring with the construction of the Haldia port and petrochemical facilities under HDA's jurisdiction. The locals objected to losing their land and broke from the Left fold with anti-GOWB and anti-CPM agitations in January. A state of siege arose after the initial clash in January, with the villagers digging up roads and blocking access. This was an affront to the CPM, and Chief Minister Bhattacharjee and the state CPM leadership were pressured by the local CPM functionaries to regain control of the area by having the police enter and letting CPM enforcers intimidate the locals. India is described as the "world's largest democracy," but as Nandigram demonstrates, the mere size of the system does not always correlate with the quality of the political process at the local level. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) The March 14 clash between police, supported by CPM activists, and villagers in Nandigram resulted in the deaths of at least 14 people and 71 injuries. While shocking, such violence is not unknown to the area. Nandigram has historically been a center for agitation even as far back as British rule. The recent violence in Nandigram is strikingly similar to what happened 65 years ago during a bloody struggle against the British. A few miles from Nandigram, in Tamluk on December 17, 1942, the villagers announced the formation of the Tamluk National Government as part of the "Quit India Movement" and declared the area as "Free Zone" -- free from British control.

Ten days later, on December 26, Nandigram also declared itself "free" and remained so for the next nine months. On September 27, 1943, the police opened fire in Nandigram, while trying to bring the "free" areas back under British control. Four persons were killed. A week later, nearly 20,000 people attacked the Nandigram police outpost. Four more people were killed, when the police fired to disperse the crowd.

13. (U) Even after Independence, agitation followed by violence has been a frequently repeated pattern in West Bengal's political dynamic. The late Sixties witnessed the Naxalbari, a rural Maoist movement that turned violent, with ultra-Left activists and the police brutally targeting each other. After the CPM came to power in 1977, there were sporadic clashes between Congress Party and Left supporters. More recently, there have been cases of violent political clashes between the Trinamul Congress and the CPM. In 1999, 13 Trinamul workers were hacked to death allegedly by CPM workers in a village called Nanoor, about 100 miles northwest from Kolkata. In May 2000 Keshpur, located in the East Medinipur district, witnessed large scale violence between Trinamul, with the support of some Maoists, and CPM activists over local political dominance. The violence resulted in 11 people being burnt to death and nearly 150 homes destroyed. Nine of those who died were Trinamul workers, the others CPM. Later that year, the violence spilled over to neighboring Garbeta where CPM workers burnt to death 11 Maoist activists.

14. (SBU) A few hundred miles away in Cooch Behar (in North Bengal) at about the same time, a similar scene unfolded. In the Mathabhanga area a group of people, allegedly Trinamul

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workers, tried to prevent voters casting their votes in a panchayat by-election. In the ensuing clash between CPM and Trinamul workers, three people were killed and five others injured.

15. (SBU) Many see Nandigram's recent violence as triggered by CPM MP Laxman Seth's overreaching to expand his HDA fiefdom. According to Deputy Resident Editor of the Business Standard Pradeep Gooptu (Protect), BBC Reporter Subir Bhaumick (Protect) and others, Seth as the HDA Chairman has become effectively a local "Godfather." Trucks traveling through the Haldia development and port area must pay fees to Seth and his organization. Seth reportedly controls the port and purposely encourages delays to increase the fees of waiting trucks. In addition, Seth has been fostering a construction boom, with new colleges, hospitals, and businesses, from which he receives a cut as well. Nandigram, neighboring Haldia, was unaffected by the developments, but a new SEZ slated to be constructed by Indonesian conglomerate Salim Group was to be under the HDA jurisdiction.

16. (SBU) Nandigram had been a Left stronghold but when letters were distributed by HDA telling the communities their land was to be acquired for the SEZ, violence erupted on January 3 and villagers attacked government officials and local CPM members. The CPM activists gathered near Nandigram and on January 6-7 mounted a bloody response killing seven people. Following that initial bout of violence, the police and CPM pulled back and maintained a cordon around the area. The stand-off remained for over two months and became an affront to local CPM leaders. Opposition groups such as the Trinamul Congress, Congress Party, fringe Maoists groups like the CPI-Maoist, and even the Muslim Jamiat-e-Ulema Hind quickly extended support to the villagers, hoping to gain a political foothold within the CPM's traditional rural constituency. According to Bhaumick, local leaders like

Seth and CPM Central Committee Member and Krishak Sabha leader Binoy Konar wanted to crush the resistance to the CPM in the villages and pressured the CPM state leadership to take action. Several thousand police were brought in to break the resistance.

In addition, reportedly hundreds of CPM activists assisted in the assault. A Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) team that started its investigation of the killings on March 16 has already arrested ten CPM cadres with weapons, ammunition and police helmets in their possession. Initial news of the CBI report released on March 21 also indicates that some of the bullet wounds of the dead were not caused by standard issue police .303 round ammunition, but likely by guns used by CPM activists.

17. (SBU) Comment: In West Bengal the corollary to the line that "all politics is local" is that local politics is violent. The political process here is less "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington" and more "The Sopranos." The clash in Nandigram had devolved from an effort to acquire land, to the CPM ensuring that its power was restored in a resistant area. The debate over the merits of converting rural areas to industry, or proper compensation, and the questions related to the GOWB's plans for industry all fell into the background as the local CPM strongmen simply sought to reassert their power and influence.  
JARDINE